

# MontCo appeals board approves Suburban Hospital expansion

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Suburban Hospital's long-stalled \$230 million expansion was approved by the Montgomery County Board of Appeals on Wednesday, allowing the Bethesda medical center to likely grow by 300,000 feet in coming years.

Aside from a few concessions -- fewer houses will be demolished to make way for the larger campus -- the board largely resolved a dispute that has for years pitted nearby homeowners against the hospital.

Eleven Suburban-owned homes, mostly on Lincoln Street, would be demolished under the approved plan. Suburban originally had said 23 houses would be eliminated in the area to facilitate a new parking garage and a new green space on their property.

Even with the changes, hospital officials said they were thrilled by the decision.

"The board's approval is great news," said Suburban spokeswoman Leslie Ford Weber. "It doesn't seem to touch upon any patient-care improvements."

Suburban expects to add 66 beds, more medical offices and updated medical equipment to the property, a subsidiary of Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Weber was unable to predict how long it would take to start construction, but say officials expect to take at least a year to obtain all the necessary building permits. And the Montgomery County Council still must approve the abandonment of one block of Lincoln Street, where most of the growth will take place.

Nearby homeowners said they preferred the current Suburban-owned houses to new green space as a buffer between the neighborhood and hospital. They argued that eliminating the houses would hurt their property values.

The five-member board unanimously approved the scaled-back plan after several balked at eliminating so many houses.

Amy Shiman, president of the Huntington Terrace Citizens' Association, said the civic group may appeal the decision in county circuit court. It has 30 days to file an appeal.

"It was a step in the right direction," she said of fewer houses being destroyed. "But we were still surprised the board essentially ignored so much of what the hearing examiner recommended."

Former Chief Hearing Examiner Francoise Carrier, now the chairwoman of the county's planning board, issued a report in June that said the hospital's plan would harm the residential aesthetic of the community.

The board's decision Wednesday was the culmination of more than two years of public hearings, meetings and reports on the expansion.